

The Political and Military Situation Before the Medak Pocket Operation

After the sudden - and for the Krajina Serbs, their army, UNPROFOR and the international community - unexpected success of the Croatian Army and police in executing the occupied area liberation of the Maslenica Operation, a change in the military and political leadership of the so-called "Republika Srpska Krajina" (RSK) behaviour was expected. The Croatian leadership was of the opinion that after the Krajina action, politicians would be more prone to negotiate and they would accept the relevant UN documents. All of these documents unequivocally recognized Croatian sovereignty over the occupied areas and asked for their peaceful return under the Croatian constitutional and legal system. The desperate Serb resistance during the Rovanijska, Mali Alan, Tulove Grede, Velika and Mala Bobija, Maslenica, Novigrad, Kašić and Zemunik battles, their fierce counter-attack when the reinforcement troops arrived from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina⁹⁵ – this counter-attack was for the first time prevented by the Croatian Army's "vertical manoeuvre"⁹⁶, its soldiers and officers combat readiness and bravery – that Serb resistance has shown that the force and the Serbian army's morale, though cracked, was still high and their perseverance on their "independence" and "paras-tatehood" was still abiding.

The Krajina Serbs attributed their defeat in the Maslenica Operation to "UN treason"⁹⁷, to surprise, and to their own relaxed attitude. The Serb military leadership claimed their defeat had been caused by a number of unfortunate coincidences.⁹⁸ In order to somehow calm down the Krajina Serbs revolt: military commanders claim to have prevented a large scale Croat offensive, that the military balance still held in their favour, and that Croatian military forces did not pose any danger to the existence of the

RSK.⁹⁹ FR Yugoslavia still provided them with significant financial and military aid. Military hardware, ammunition, fuel and people still crossed over Bosnian and Croatian borders without any impediment.

The Yugoslav Army and Serbs living in Croatia and Bosnia considered the whole area to be one, "large integrated battle-



Picture 7: Gospić 03.01.1992 - Military situation at the time of Sarajevo ceasefire agreement - Lika operational area

field"¹⁰⁰, which in the near future should become an all-Serbian state.

Arrogance and disrespect of diplomatic rules were the Serb politicians' guidelines. After breaking off with the rest of Krajina's politicians, Goran Hadžić¹⁰¹, self-proclaimed president of "RSK state" came to Geneva without an invitation. Krajina's politicians took sides of their preference, Hadžić chose his to be Baranja and Vukovar, the remnants of the JNA and ex-military cadre. It was an easy way out for him, because eastern Slavonia bordered with FR Yugoslavia (Serbia) and actually became its integral part at a time. Serbian politicians from western Slavonia tried to secretly negotiate with the Croatian government, but were discovered and punished¹⁰². The hardest line was taken by the "Knin stream" politicians, who were geographically the most far removed from

Belgrade and the political power's centre - Slobodan Milošević, from where the principal moves in Serb politics were made. Knin politicians therefore acted independently. After the June 1993 Erdut Agreement in Vienna¹⁰³ a ceasefire between the Croatian Army and the Krajina paramilitary should have been signed. But instead of signing, the rebel Krajina Serbs issued an ultimatum, asking for the Croatian Army's withdrawal from areas liberated during the Maslenica military and police action. The agreement endorsed by the international community consequently had not been signed, Krajina Serbs stubbornly demanded their parastate be recognized. It was again clear that the dispute should be solved with arms.

The situation in the area after the Maslenica action started to slowly change, the Krajina Serb's morale was low, especially after the pontoon bridge over the Maslenica gorge was constructed. The calls for a general mobilization were issued daily, deserters were punished and some of them had escaped to Belgrade. Rumors were spread about oil being stolen, for which Goran Hadžić was blamed. Corruption was in full swing. Money had been stolen and it was said that Knin politicians deposited it in Belgrade's banks. Soldier's wages were months late. The value of the "Krajina Dinar" fell dramatically, and there were constant shortages of basic food necessities and fuel.¹⁰⁴ In order to boost morale, which had fallen after the Maslenica Operation, several groups of volunteers came from Serbia proper. One of these was "Captain Dragan"¹⁰⁵ – who, in Bruška near Benkovac established the commando training centre for the so-called "Knindža's."¹⁰⁶ All the volunteers and promises of further aid were just a pretence. The RSK belief was that should a danger arise, FR Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Army was ready to help. That firm faith was the guarantor of the RSK's existence. The majority of Krajina Serbs were not aware that Milošević's politics has changed. This change was caused by pressure from greater powers and imposed sanction. Milošević's politics shifted to a more realistic goal – the lifting of sanctions imposed on FR Yugoslavia and the creation of a Republika Srpska in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. Without their knowledge, Serbs in Croatia were left to fend for themselves.

War Operations in Lika 1991 – 1993



Picture 8: The plan of the Serbian strategic attack operation in the aggression on Croatia. - Graphic published in Adm. Domazet-Lošo's book "Hrvatska i Veliko Ratište"

The JNA and Rebel Serb Army's Military Organization

During July, August and into mid-September 1991 Serb rebel forces occupied areas of Lika where the Serb population were a majority. According to previously drawn JNA plans¹⁰⁷, its counter-intelligence service (SSNO) – the state security service (continued to be called KOS)¹⁰⁸, had armed and started to organize rebel units (Territorial defence, partisan brigades, paramilitary and Četnik units) in the 13th Rijeka corps, whose territorial command the Lika area fell under. The rebel attacks on Croatian police patrols, control taking in municipalities and cities – spread from Knin to Korenica, Gračac, Lovinac, Sveti Rok, Medak and Gospić.¹⁰⁹ Threatening rumours were spread among the general population. This being part of a special psychological war which JNA experts had studied at British colleges for special warfare.¹¹⁰ So fear and panic had preceded any army advancement. Terrorist shelling,

psychological warfare, targeted massacres of Croatian civilians in Lovinac, Sv. Rok, and Široka Kula, had forced the rest of the Croatian population in Krajina to flee to Gospić, Otočac, Perušić, Lički Osik or other safer parts of Croatia. The best example of this was the difficult exodus of the Lovinac villagers over the massive Velebit mountains, to the security of Croatia's coastline.

The Croatian Military and Police Forces Organization

At the beginning of September 1991 in Gospić and Otočac three battalions of the 118th brigade of the National Guard Union as well as the Ministry of Interior police forces were deployed. Their units were poorly armed with light infantry weaponry and a few mortars at their disposal.

Military plans and Military Operations development

It was clear by their August and September military operations that Serb rebels and the JNA tried to take control of the Gospić - Karlobag and Gospić - Perušić - Otočac roads, in order to encircle the town of Gospić. They also tried to interrupt the Otočac - Brinje and Josipdol - Ogulin route. If successful, they would have managed to cut Zagreb from Senj and Split, and eventually would have reached Rijeka to join General Čad's troops¹¹¹ - the 13th JNA corps, still stationed there.

But the National Guard Union (ZNG) and Ministry of Interior police forces fortified their defence lines preventing the enemy's further advancement to the fictitious Karlovac - Karlobag line, the future "Greater Serbian" frontier – which was the strategic objective of the rebel Serbs. The Croatian's shortage of weapons was still an acute problem, and the only way for them to arm was to break into the JNA army depots and barracks in Lika. The decision was made, and on September 14th 1991 the operation of overtaking JNA army barracks in Gospić, Kaniža and Perušić was taken, which successfully finished with Serbs handing in the radar station on Panos over to Croats on September 22nd. At that point, the JNA started to crumble. Many young conscripts had fled barracks and with the help of the Croatians returned to their homes in Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. What was left of the JNA was professional officers and lower-ranking staff, as well as local mobilized Serb conscripts. The Croatian National Guard Union and the Ministry of Interior forces had, in spite of the resistance, captured all JNA installations and seized greater quantities of small and heavy arms. The enemy tried to

unblock their surrounded forces, but failed to do so. During the Gospić action a JNA general was taken prisoner¹¹² and later exchanged for Croatian prisoners. After arming themselves with heavy weaponry – tanks, APC's and cannons, the ZNG and police were able to engage in more limited operations to liberate the occupied territory. One such action was the attack on the village of Divoselo. On November 16th 1991¹¹³ Croatian forces broke Serb defence lines and entered Divoselo. But after receiving the order to withdraw, they returned to Gospić. That action, taken in a village that was a partisan-Četnik symbol, that before 1991 determined all of the Lika region's development, had a hard-hitting psychological effect on the Serb side. In a similar action taken on Divoselo on October 3rd 1991 the leader of the "Beli Orlovi", the Belgrade paramilitary Serb volunteer unit, Đorđe Božović - Giška¹¹⁴ was killed. It was yet another heavy blow for the rebel Serbs. At the beginning of November in the Lika area, the Croatian 111th and 128th brigade came from Rijeka. With those enforcements a military balance was achieved. Serb forces answered with heavy artillery attacks which for the citizens of Gospić, Perušić and Otočac became a daily routine.

Deceitful Ceasefire

On January 3rd 1992 the Sarajevo Ceasefire Plan was implemented, but Gospić, Stari Lički Osik, Perušić and Otočac still underwent artillery bombardments. On occasion they were also under the enemy's infantry attacks. The occupied region of Lika bordered Mala Kapela in the north, and the Velebit Ridge in the south. After the RSK started to "govern it", the non-Serb population was ethnically cleansed - expelled or killed. The crimes committed on the Croat population continued even during the UNPROFOR mandate. Such was the one committed in Podlapača as revenge for the Medak Pocket's defeat. Lika had been, from the Partisan and Četnik movement during World War II, the strategically important area for the realization of expansionist Serb aspirations. In 1991 it became the "Krajina spine", the link between Banija and Kordun, with the central points of the parastate being Gračac and Knin surrounding areas. Lika also bordered and had a foothold in Serb areas in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. The radical Serb indoctrination, which in Yugoslavia was masked by Communism and Yugoslavism, was especially strong in Lika. One should remember that Serb rebel units from Lika had moved first. The first larger clash with Croatian special police forces happened at the Plitvice Lakes resort on May 1st 1991 in Lika, when the first Croatian defender, Josip Jović was killed.



Picture 9: The real strategy threat - Croatian territory under the direct threat of "SVK" artillery

Picture 10: Dislocation of "RSK artillery - rocket" support of the real strategy threat.
Maps published in Adm. D. Domazet-Lošo's book "Hrvatska i Veliko Ratište"



Military Strategic Position

In Otočac's surrounding area, the Serb rebels occupied dominant hills and kept roads on the Otočac - Josipdol and Otočac - Gospić routes under fire. Near Lički Osik, the communication route of Gospić - Perušić was under their direct fire. Gospić had been and had remained the political and strategic centre for the entire region of Lika. For Croats to lose Gospić would mean losing Lika. Gospić was held by the Croats while Serb forces held a semi-circle position around them. Serbs held the surrounding dominant positions and had the Gospić - Karlobag communication line under their direct control. Although Croatian forces held most of the Velebit Mountain positions as far as the Mali Alan passage – the possible advancement and manoeuvre to that area was under Serb control. The Serbs shelled Gospić and its surrounding roads from Barlet, Medak, Divoselo and Debela Glava. They threatened to overrun Gospić and cut off all communication to it. The consequent capture of the Velebit Mountain positions looked imminent. If Serb forces had reached the Croatian coastline, and had succeeded in cutting the country's north from its south regions, Croatia would have been in a catastrophic position.

The Enemy's Military and Political Situation

Serb political dissension continued while the rift between the army and the police widened. Civilians as well as the army experienced the greater shortages of fuel and food. The RSK Army's great problem was their lack of manpower. They thought that the lack of soldiers could be replaced by heavy weaponry and by Serb volunteers coming from other Serb-held areas. Or if danger would arise the assumption was that Yugoslav Army troops would come to assist. Thanks to the ineffectiveness of UN forces, the influx of Serb volunteers was not completely blocked. The limited number of Krajina Serb soldiers had to engage along a very long frontline. The long duration of battle readiness had tired and unmotivated these men. They behaved much like the population of the Krajina had before; they lived in their homes, worked their fields, and at the sign of an emergency, took their rifles and went into battle positions. The difference between civilians and soldiers therefore disappeared; they all wore uniforms or elements from uniforms and they carried arms.

After Maslenica, at the Yugoslav Army's HQ in Belgrade, "the real threat strategy"¹¹⁵ was conceived and published – the artillery and rocket barrage on the Republic of Croatia's strategic objects.

Serbs believed that this strategy would stop further Croatian Army attacks, and compensate for the Serb shortage in manpower. Using heavy artillery, the air force and surface-to-surface missiles combined with small-scale terrorist attacks, the Serbs intention was to create an overpowering effect and for their forces to achieve constant battle readiness and alertness.

Before the Medak Operation Serbs executed several terrorist attacks – they massacred two Croatian special police members in the Velebit Mountains. While a Serb reconnaissance and commando unit was set on the Divoselo area to Potklisa and the Gospić - Karlobag road. From enemy documents seized after the Oluja Operation it became clear that they planned on capturing Podklisa in order to control the route vital to Gospić's survival. A second document mentioned by General Markač revealed the Serb plan to commence an attack on Gospić from the same area (Divoselo)¹¹⁶ just fifteen minutes before the Croatian Medak Pocket action on September 9th 1993. Confiscated Serbian Krajina Army documents confirm General Markač's claims as reported in the press. The Serbian Krajina Army HQ wanted to pre-empt the intended Croatian Army attack, which was visible in light of the build-up and regrouping of Croatian Army forces. The 9th mobile brigade HQ commanding officer, Colonel Jovo Kordić. commanded an additional Serb force reconnaissance mission. On August 26th 1993 he stated that: *"...Based on tactical and other available data, observation, reconnaissance, and data furnished to us by the 15th corps command, it is evident that the Ustaša forces are reinforcing the front on the Kraljičina Vrata - Mali Golić and Dušica - Visočica line. They firmly hold the Velebit ridge positions and are endangering the positions of our 1st and 2nd mobile brigade. In order to secure the brigade's left flank and to fully monitor the status and Ustaša forces deployment on the Visočica - Mali Alan line, and their further intentions, I have decided (Colonel Jovo Kordić – author's note) to order additional forceful reconnaissance on the lines..."*¹¹⁷ It was obvious that the data about: *"the increased activity of Ustaša forces on the northwest slopes of the Velebit Mountains, whose objective it was to cut our brigade defence area on the Visočica - Čitluk -Ornice line,"* which members of the Serb Krajina Army gathered during intense reconnaissance, asked for greater alertness. So on September 3rd 1993, Colonel Kordić *"ordered full battle readiness in the 2nd mobile brigade, LAD PVO, MPOAD, HAD and TČ units."*¹¹⁸

Since the gathered information became more grave, Colonel Kordić wrote *"...Ustaša forces are in control of military objects on the slopes of the Velebit Mountains. They are building a road on the Duler-Alanak - Delukino Vrelo route. Their objective is to cut our brigade's defence line at Visočica - Lički čitluk - Ornice."* He then issues the command: *"a part of the 9th Mobile Brigade force*

has a task to, on September 9th 1993 perform a forceful reconnaissance in the region Mokra pećina - t.p. 665 - Velika kosa and reach the Kosa - Dujmovača -t.p. 618 - Bukova glava - Jelovac line." This important document will be discussed further, but at this point it is important to note that the actual order for battle readiness was given on "September 9th 1993 at 08:00 hours".



Picture 11: Gospić 1991. - Military situation, autumn 1991.

The Croatian Army and Ministry of the Interior Forces Organization and Countermeasures

The 9th Mobile Guard Brigade "Vukovi" Formation

The 9th Mobile Guard brigade was formed as the 6th Guard Brigade on November 1st 1992 from elements of the 118th and 133rd Brigade. Their achievements include the defence of Lika and stopping rebel Serbs and the JNA advancement into "Croatia's backbone". In January 1993 the Brigade was renamed and became the 9th Mobile Brigade, known as "Lički Vukovi" (Lika's wolves) or for short "Vukovi" (wolves). The Brigade took part in the Maslenica action. It successfully mastered the difficult mountain terrain on the Rovanijska - Jasenice - Tulove Grede line.

General Bobetko especially praised its armoured division. On the HQ's commander order, the Brigade returned to Lika and defended the frontline from Gospić to Otočac. Engaging the enemy on a daily basis the 9th Brigade prepared to undertake the most difficult war efforts. Such an effort would be the September 9th 1993 operation – pushing off imminent danger from Gospić and neutralizing the most important Četniks' centre in Divoselo – a village symbolizing the radical Serb movement in the heart of Croatia.

The Croatian Ministry of the Interior Special Police

The Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia special police was constituted as an antiterrorist unit, but because of the spreading of the war it soon became a much larger and more respectable force. Its members were well trained, armed and motivated. On Lika's battlefield they held the Velebit Mountains, prevented enemy advancement over the Mali Alan pass to Zadar and Karlobag. The commander of the special police, General Mladen Markač's HQ was on the Viševica peak. In the Maslenica action they liberated Tulove Grede. The Croatian special police unit blocked the Mali Alan pass and took Velika and Mala Bobija. These experienced units knew the difficult mountain area terrain and their enemy well.

The Reconnaissance and Commando Group Actions (ID-Groups)

The Croatian army and special police forces situated on the Velebit Mountains tried through their reconnaissance and commando groups' incursions to identify the enemy's weak points and to divert their attention from real locations of a Croatian attack. They also suffered some losses inflicted by the Serb commando units. During July and August, Serbian Krajina Army reconnaissance commando units undertook five major attacks. On July 7th near Bilaj at the Ornice - Jasikovac area, on July 22nd on the road connecting Otočac and Jovići, and attacks on August 30th and 31st. The most significant attack was the ambush and killing of two Croatian special police members on the Velebit Mountains. This was the trigger, General Bobetko writes, for starting the Medak Pocket operation. The capture and killing of Croatian special police members was part of a planned attack and forceful reconnaissance mission commanded by Serb Colonel Kordić (the command for additional forceful reconnaissance given on August 26th 1993 and the actual order for full battle readiness given on September 3rd 1993). On September 4th the Serbian Krajina

Army commando group, accompanied by artillery, attacked the special police unit on Debela Glava - the prominent mountain t.p. on Velebit from which there was a complete overview of the river Lika valley from Gospić and Medak. Later that area was called the Medak Pocket. Two Croatian policemen were killed and massacred, while three policemen were wounded. After that date, the Croatian Army main staff HQ gave warning about a possible Serb commando attack on Croatian positions along the Velebit Mountains. According to a Serbian POW and confiscated commanding order dated September 8th 1993, major forceful reconnaissance and battle operations were planned to be executed on September 9th 1993 at 08:00 hours. After Croatian President Tuđman, persuaded by General Bobetko's arguments, sanctioned the action, another operation was taken to distract the enemy's attention from the real target. It was the attack on the village of Urije near Novi Lički Osik on September 6th 1993 that served as a diversion in which the reconnaissance and commando elements of the Croatian 9th Mobile Brigade destroyed an enemy checkpoint. The Croatian Army was certain that the enemy forces were led to believe, (Serb documents say otherwise), that the target of a full-scale Croatian attack would be the ammunition factory "Marko Orešković" in Novi Lički Osik and did not, (so the Croatian Army assessed), discover the Croatian preparations for Divoselo, Čitluk and Počitelj. That Croatian assessment was faulty, because according to the commands given by the commanding officer of the 9th Serb Mobile Brigade, Colonel Kordić, it was obvious that Serbs were quite aware of the Croatian special police forces buildup on the Velebit Mountains, and the threat of cutting the "Pocket" on the Visočica - Lički Čitluk - Ornice line. Both sides therefore had at the same time engaged in preparation for a military action. The Croatian side was to undertake a smaller scale action in order to take better tactical positions and push off the enemy from Gospić. The Serb side wanted to take control of the Velebit Mountains, to secure the Medak - Gračac road in order to prevent the second end of the pincer movement to close (the first one was secured after Croatian success at the Maslenica operation) that from Lika and the Velebit Mountains threatened Gračac, Obrovac, Benkovac and Knin. And, not the least, the Serbs wanted to politically and militarily humiliate Croatia for daring to attempt a decisive military action like Maslenica.